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Inside the Air Force

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House appropriators have crafted legislation that encourages the Pentagon to buy up to 36 KC-X next-generation tankers per year from one or two contractors, according to a congressional report. The Defense Department's current plan calls for buying between 12 and 15 aircraft per year.

The provision included in the House Appropriations defense subcommittee's mark-up of the fiscal year 2010 defense-spending bill "will allow for recapitalization in one-third the time and thus allow for a rapid retirement of the current KC-135," the aircraft the KC-X tanker will replace, according to language the subcommittee included in its spending report.

The subcommittee completed its work on the FY-10 spending

bill on July 16. The House Appropriations Committee will consider the subcommittee's bill tomorrow morning.

“This plan will result in avoiding a large sustainment and modernization cost of the legacy KC-135 fleet by allowing them to retire earlier than is currently programmed,” the report states.

“Additionally, having more than one aircraft provider will allow for competition to help control the procurement cost, promote cost-reduction measures, and allow for a faster aircraft replacement rate.”

The subcommittee -- chaired by Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) -- also approved \$440 million to go toward acquiring one or two KC-X tanker aircraft. Since last fall, Murtha has advocated buying tankers from both Boeing and Northrop Grumman-EADS, the two companies that have been battling for the multibillion-dollar contract. In recent months, his dual-buy rhetoric has lessened.

Last year, Murtha's panel recommended buying between 24 and 36 tankers per year in its mark-up of the FY-09 defense-spending bill.

In their review of this year's bill, the subcommittee also directs the defense secretary to submit a report to the congressional defense committees detailing the KC-X tanker competition before a draft or final request for proposal is released. In that report, the lawmakers want:

- A “description of key mission requirement and performance parameters that will be used as the basis for determining the key selection criteria in the source-selection process;”

- A “full and complete characterization and definition of 'best value;’”

- A “description of the process that the Department of Defense intends to use to ensure open, balanced and transparent communications with potential offerors; and”

- A “full description of the corrections made to the

source-selection process that addresses the issues raised by the Government Accountability Office” during the last round of the tanker competition.

Last week, the Pentagon announced the draft RFP release could slip into the fall.